

# Finnish

## solidarity project is improving the quality of life of people with autism in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, children and young adults with autism now have better education and training opportunities as a result of a co-operative development project between autism organisations in Finland and Bangladesh.

The Prerona Project (meaning 'the inspiration project') is a development initiative between the Finnish Association for Autism and Asperger's Syndrome (FAAAS) and the Society for the Welfare of Autistic Children (SWAC) in Bangladesh. The project takes a human rights oriented approach to developing an inclusive model of education for students with autism, addressing the training needs of young adults with autism and raising awareness. The project runs from 2007 to 2014, and it was made possible when the FAAAS secured funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Finland, as well as fundraising activities.

### Autism in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, children with autism who are fortunate enough to access medical services at all are frequently misdiagnosed and given antipsychotic drugs due to the lack of knowledge about autism among doctors and professionals. People with autism and their families often suffer from the stigma associated with autism. Parents are often frustrated and in a state of anguish over the lack of information and services that could enable them to help their children.

The mainstream education system in Bangladesh rarely meets the needs of children with autism and other disabilities, despite the fact that the country has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and that the right to education is enshrined in its constitution. And the situation is much worse for children in rural and slum areas.

Currently, around 500 disability organisations are working to provide services for people with disabilities in Bangladesh, mainly concentrated in the capital city, Dhaka. There are now numerous schools for children with disabilities throughout the country, including around 20 schools in Dhaka.



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### Developing an inclusive approach to education

The SWAC operates one of only three schools which work exclusively with children with autism in Bangladesh. The school is located in Dhaka and provides educational services for 116 students.

The first phase of the Prerona Project (from 2007 to 2011) increased the number of children with autism who are gaining a basic education and developed the educational facilities at the SWAC's school in Dhaka. The co-operative development project has provided basic teaching materials and technology such as computers to the school.

The school now also offers a student exchange programme in collaboration with mainstream schools with the aim to increase the inclusion of students with autism in the wider community and raise awareness about autism.

In addition, the Autism Visible Programme (developed by the Prerona Project) works to increase the inclusion of the students with autism in their communities by arranging weekly excursions to local shops, banks, factories, museums and parks.



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The project also provides free education and food to children from low income families in slum areas of Dhaka. As part of this initiative, two teachers provide free education to groups of 8 to 12 students, five days per week .

## Training opportunities

The second phase of the project (from 2012 to 2014) is focused on the situation of young people with autism at the SWAC's school. The school has set up a work and activity centre to help students with autism with the transition to adult life. Students receive vocational education and training in hospitality, housekeeping and manual crafts. They also learn practical skills for everyday life such as cooking, cleaning and sewing, and develop their behavioural and social skills. Every year, exhibitions are held to showcase the students' artworks and handicrafts.



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## Raising awareness about autism

The Prerona Project also runs campaigns with partner organisations to raise awareness of the rights of people with autism among policy-makers and to create positive changes in social attitudes towards people with autism in Bangladesh.

Following Bangladesh's first World Autism Awareness Day campaign in 2008 and Bangladesh's first autism conference in 2009 (both organised by the SWAC and their partner organisations) commitments were made by government representatives in support of the rights of people with autism under the national policy for education and children. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics has also included autism in its population census since 2011, but the national government has yet to make any official recognition of autism as a disability.



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Images: Activities and meetings as part of the Prerona Project.